

Martin Walsh  
Comhairle Contae Phort Láirge  
Phort Láirge

**Is this response the personal opinion of the respondent or is the response given on behalf of the above organisation?**

On behalf of the above organisation

**Are you willing to have this response published on the Department's website [www.ahg.gov.ie](http://www.ahg.gov.ie)?**

Yes

**Communication under section 9 of the Act (Letters, emails & mail shots)**

Current obligations under the Act:

- To respond to communication in the language in which it was received;
- To issue information in writing or electronically in Irish or bilingually.

**1. In your opinion, are these obligations adequate, are they excessive or do they need to be amended?**

These obligations are basic obligations relating to the right of the Irish citizen to conduct their business with an organ of the state in the official language of their choice.

Members of the public are more likely to access services in Irish by written communication rather than orally. Service provision in Waterford County Council has been streamlined and made more efficient through the development of a Customer Care Desk. The placement of Irish speaking staff on the Customer Care Desk has also centralised the provision of Irish language services and made it easier for members of the public who wish to conduct their business through Irish to access these services. In general, the efficiency and cost effectiveness of meeting the obligations referred to above can be greatly improved in public bodies through the establishment of Customer Care Desks, adequately staffed with Irish speakers, who can provide Irish language services to the same standard, and just as quickly as services in English.

**Publications under section 10 of the Act**

Current obligations under the Act:

- To publish certain documents simultaneously in Irish and in English (e.g. annual reports, audited accounts, public policy proposals, strategy statements etc.)

**2. In your opinion, are these obligations adequate, are they excessive or do they need to be amended?**

It is correct to have certain obligations in relation to which documents are produced bilingually, but these should be prioritised in relation to demand. We support the Language Commissioner's proposal in his document, "Review of the Official Languages

Act, 2003" (July 2011) - Suggestion No. 3, page 13, that "With regard to official publications provided through Irish, it is recommended that priority be given to those publications for which there is the greatest demand from the public, the Irish speaking and Gaeltacht communities included". A list of such documents should be published following agreement with the Department/Language Commissioner. A national system should be established to standardise certain publications, in order to avoid the unnecessary duplication of forms and other documents by similar public bodies nationwide.

**Signage, stationery & recorded oral announcements under Regulations of the Act (S.I. No. 391 of 2008)**

Current obligations under the Act:

- To comply with the Regulations in regard to the use of Irish and English on signs, stationery and in recorded oral announcements.

**3. In your opinion, are these obligations adequate, are they excessive or do they need to be amended?**

The Signage Regulations under the Official Languages Act and the Traffic Signs Manual (which are currently contradictory in parts) need to be integrated to give the definitive, consistent road signage regulations.

**Language Schemes under the Act**

The language schemes form the core of the Language Act. The language schemes set out the system through which public bodies develop their services in Irish over a period of time. It is through the language schemes that the use of Irish is dealt with on websites, leaflets, brochures, forms, through telephone services, through other interpersonal services, through online services etc.

**4.(a) In your opinion, is the system of language schemes satisfactory, excessive or does it need to be amended?**

The Language Scheme system needs to be amended. The system as it currently stands is very cumbersome and labour-intensive and does not allow for consistency of Irish language services across the public sector. There are many difficulties with the implementation of the Scheme system and it is not operating in the manner that it should. We would support the Language Commissioner's proposal in his document, "Review of the Official Languages Act, 2003" (July 2011) - Suggestion No. 5, page 14 that the language scheme system be reviewed and revised - "An integrated approach is necessary, which would identify those services through Irish for which most demand would exist".

**4.(b) Would you recommend an alternative system which would be more efficient and more effective?**

Yes. Again, the Language Commissioner has recommended a few possible alternatives, including "a new "standards" system based on statutory regulations ..... as is planned for the Welsh language in Wales" ["Review of the Official Languages Act, 2003" (July 2011) - Suggestion No. 5, page 14]. This system would outline the level of services through Irish to be provided by public bodies in accordance with their classification by certain criteria, and would have the advantage of introducing consistencies across various sectors. We would propose developing a series of national Statutory Regulations, encompassing the basic, principal aims and obligations of the Official Languages Act and the various Irish Schemes, which would be primarily administered through Customer Care Desks. This would certainly be more efficient and cost-effective and merits serious consideration.

#### **Services from public bodies in the Gaeltacht**

In order for the State to support the status and use of Irish in the Gaeltacht, it is vital that Gaeltacht communities can carry out their official business with the State through Irish.

#### **5.(a) Are you satisfied with the services being provided by public bodies in Irish in the Gaeltacht?**

The level of services through Irish being provided by public bodies in the Gaeltacht is entirely dependent on the availability of sufficient staff that can deliver services in Irish to the same standard as services through English.

#### **5.(b) Would you recommend any amendments that would enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of public bodies in this area?**

No comment

#### **Other provisions of the Act**

Other provisions of the Act ratify rights with regard to the use of Irish in the Oireachtas, in the courts and in the State's placenames system.

#### **6. In your opinion, are these provisions adequate, are they excessive or do they need to be amended?**

These provisions are adequate.

#### **Public bodies under the Act**

The Act requires public bodies, which are listed under the Act, to provide services through Irish. The full list of public bodies featured under the Act can be found at [www.ahg.gov.ie](http://www.ahg.gov.ie).

The following public bodies are listed under the Act – Government Departments and offices, local authorities, universities, other third-level institutions, vocational education committees, An Garda Síochána, the Courts Service, the Revenue Commissioners,

the Health Service Executive, other State agencies, boards & companies.

**7. In your opinion, is this list of public bodies under the Act appropriate or is an amendment necessary in this area?**

The list is comprehensive, but would suggest considering categorising the public bodies in relation to the level of interaction and direct service provision to the public. Therefore, we would support the Language Commissioners suggestion that "public bodies be classified into different categories (A, B, C etc.) in accordance with their range of functions and their level of interaction with the public in general, including the Irish language and Gaeltacht communities, and that the level of service through Irish to be provided by public bodies should depend on that classification ["Review of the Official Languages Act, 2003" (July 2011) - Suggestion No. 1, page 11].

**The Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga**

The Office of An Coimisinéir Teanga was established under the Act. The main role of the Office is to monitor the implementation of the Act.

**8. In your opinion, are the powers and functions of that Office adequate or excessive and do they need to be amended?**

No comment.

**In general**

**9. Are there other amendments to the Act that you would recommend in order to ensure that the legislation is suitable and appropriate to its function?**

Any amendments that would ensure joined-up thinking in relation to Irish language legislation - for example consistency with the Planning Acts, Road Traffic Manuals etc...

**10. What services through Irish do you personally require from public bodies or what services do you think should be given priority?**

Prioritise service provision to Gaeltacht/other Irish speaking areas through the provision of centralised Customer Service Desks; the provision of Irish language services in Gaeltacht areas and the standardisation of publications.

**11. What do you think are the obstacles or difficulties associated with providing the same standard of services in Irish by public bodies?**

The most fundamental obstacle is the lack of staff with competency in the Irish language, as pointed out by the Language Commissioner ["Review of the Official Languages Act, 2003" (July 2011) - Suggestion No. 6, page 15].

**12. What amendments would you recommend to the Act in order to develop State services through Irish in an efficient and cost-effective manner?**

All amendments as outlined in questions 1-11 above. In summary: (i) the establishment of centralised Customer Care Desks in public organisations (ii) the prioritisation and standardisation of public documents (iii) the co-ordination of signage regulations (iv) a review and amendment of the language scheme system, moving toward a system of statutory regulations (v) the prioritisation of Irish language service provision to Gaeltacht and other Irish speaking areas (vi) the classification of public bodies in accordance with the level of direct customer contact Amendments such as these would ensure a more effective legislative basis for the provision of services through the Irish language in this State, ensuring that service delivery is carried out in a more efficient and cost-effective manner